

US wants Pakistan to

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

Part of Musharraf's problem is that while he is Washington's ally in Pakistan, he is also the representative of the Military oligarchy

AFTER more than six years, Pakistan finds itself in probably the most difficult position it has been in since signing on as a partner in the US-led "war on terror".

The political turmoil created by the recent assassination of former premier Benazir Bhutto and the consolidation of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the country just months ahead of another Taliban spring offensive in Afghanistan have made Washington decidedly anxious that Islamabad do something decisive about the situation. But while Pakistan wants to remain on side with the US, and the West, by taking appropriate action against militancy, this carries with it the grave danger of exacerbating the situation, and opening up the country to further terror.

A senior Pakistani security official elaborated for Asia Times Online, "We have actually been thrown into a deep quagmire where we are not left with many options. The CIA's presence in

Pakistan has made it impossible for Pakistan to handle the Taliban problem independently and through dialogue. On the other hand, there is no military solution on the horizon against the Taliban and another (Pakistani army) operation against militants would cause more than serious repercussions".

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity as his job does not allow him to speak on the record, continued, "Now we are at a crossroad and we feel

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threatened that if this problem escalates it may give Western powers and their regional allies a chance to justify an attack on Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. Therefore, we are walking a tightrope where, on the one hand our strategic ties with the West are at risk if we don't adhere to their demands, but on the other hand our own internal security is at risk.

"Nevertheless", he added, "nations

do take steps on a priority basis for their internal security".

Reports from the US at the weekend indicate that the George W Bush administration wants to expand the authority of the CIA and the military to conduct more aggressive covert operations in Pakistan.

While a Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokesman has officially dismissed the notion as fanciful, this does not rule out the likelihood of heavy CIA

involvement on targets identified through intelligence on both sides of the border.

The overriding goal will be to cut the supply lines of the Taliban and Al Qaeda between Pakistan and Afghanistan by squeezing them between coalition forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan forces across the border.

The boundaries of the operation

have been set on the basis of two facts. These are Al Qaeda's bases and the Taliban's supply lines from Pakistan into the three southeastern Afghan provinces of Paktia, Paktika and Khost and Helmand in the southwest. Al Qaeda bases have been located in Bajaur Agency and North Waziristan while the Taliban's supply lines have primarily been traced from South Waziristan.

Pakistan's strategic quarters, though, are extremely concerned over the possible consequences of such a pincer operation, planned at a time when general elections have already been pushed back from this month to next and could be delayed even further.

Compounding the problem is the fact that the Pakistani Military is fast losing all of its gains in the Swat Valley in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). In response to rising militancy in the valley, fueled by Mullah Fazlullah, over the past few months the Army has cracked down, forcing the militants to retreat into the tribal areas.

Al Qaeda responded by activating its network through Maulana Faqir Muhammad, the local strongman of Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Faqir, from Bajaur Agency,

o bite the bullet

sent men and arms into the valley, while Punjabi and Uzbek fighters from the South Waziristan and North Waziristan tribal areas joined hands with the militants. As a result, the militants have fought back strongly against the Pakistani Army, which could pull back in the coming days.

The Bush administration is raising the military stakes at a time when Pakistan is under fire from Washington for not making adequate efforts in the

foreign assistance sub-committee of the Senate, as saying, "What is amazing to me about our policy is that Pakistan is brimming with a smart, educated, moderate centre. As long as we are pumping our money into security assistance and putting all our eggs in the basket with (President Pervez) Musharraf, we are making a critical mistake".

There are recurrent calls in Washington that Pakistan's multi-

and Peshawar in NWFP would be prime targets.

The best that Pakistan can do is attempt to walk a middle path, as it has done so often in the past, even though both the militants and Washington are demanding that Islamabad complies 100% with their demands.

The difficulties of this position are well illustrated by an incident on Sunday in which Al Qaeda-backed militants shot dead eight tribal leaders involved in efforts to broker a ceasefire between security forces and Pakistani Taliban commanders in the northwest. The men, who were scheduled to meet each other on Monday, were killed in separate attacks in South Waziristan.

Part of Musharraf's problem is that while he is Washington's ally in Pakistan, he is also the representative of the Military oligarchy. Further, his political survival has become heavily dependent on slain Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP). New PPP head, Bhutto's widower Asif Zardari, is in contact with US officials and is in tune with the "war on terror" and supports Musharraf in this respect. But this PPP support could be withdrawn at any time should it be perceived that Musharraf is straying from the US agenda. COURTESY ASIA TIMES

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"war on terror". This disenchantment was captured by Chester Bowles, a "liberal lion" of the Democratic Party, who wrote in the New York Times recently, "American military assistance to Pakistan in the last 15 years will, I believe, be listed by historians as among our most costly blunders".

The Washington Post also recently quoted Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, chairman of the

billion dollar military aid package be reviewed or even stopped if its performance is not found satisfactory.

Pakistani intelligence, however, is acutely aware that militants are likely to unleash attacks in the softer underbelly of the nation should the Pakistani Army (or the US Army) launch new, vigorous attacks in the tribal areas. Cities such as the port hub of Karachi, the capital Islamabad